

## S.O.B.

No, girls, there's something about him. He's got that face... What face? The usual. Nose, lips, eyes, chin. Bingo, a jerk in a million. Green as a worm in a faint. But that body! Yeah, not so bad. Take him? Why the hell not? But hey, I've got dibs next! There you go, you nincompoops. Get a look at what he's wearing. What did you expect from a fatherless child? You want jeans? He's got 'em. All his button-downs are fitted. Fitted! Handstitched, can't you see? So what?... T-shirts, this, that, a windbreaker with a zipper, as good as anyone's. And those shoes, by the way, are Yugoslavian, I noticed, and the sneakers - he's just making a play for your sympathy. Simple, yeah, a regular son of a gun. "'Tis a gift to be simple..." Hold on, Ninka, you were going to say... I was going to say that he's a little box with a secret. For instance, why doesn't he ever look anyone in the eye, huh? Why's he looking into the wild blue yonder when he's supposed to be looking at you? Next time his blue yonder ought to give him a clue about how you spell monogamous - one word or with a hyphen. Go on! What - he really didn't know? What do you care, he's got the bod, who needs a brain. All right you, now you know. No, but still? What? Ninka said he's a little box with a secret. What secret? That secret. Him? I bet... hey Mr. Big Stuff... Well now, I can tell you a story that'll make your eyes pop out! So? We all got together at Svetka's, remember? Let's say I do... Remember, when things started gettin' crazy and he went out on the balcony? Go on. Okay, Yulka, spell it out for our comrade here. Here's how it was... I go out on the balcony. What'd you skip out for? I say, Let's go for a spin, I say. And he says, I don't play your games. What games do you play? I ask. And he smiles, What games? And you know, he runs his finger down my neck like you do when you're checking a table for dust... Well, was it very dusty? Oh ho! Aren't we witty now. Ninka, lay off. Well, what then? Then I walked around in a scarf for a whole week. Exactly, girls, I was telling Svetka too, look, I say, Yulka is working in the Beryozka ensemble. But I don't get it, what's with the scarf? I'd like to see how you'd look with a mark like that - an honest-to-God hickey. Get out of here, Yulka! That's from a finger? What, you don't believe it? Ninka, she doesn't believe it. I saw it myself, girls, as red as red can be. At first I thought the same as you, that, I'm laughing, who laid that on you? And she says, I'll lay one on him, yeah, I'll lay one on him he won't forget! Hey, what kind of guy is he? A real worm. Not much to look at first off. I'm telling you, a jerk in a million. And not much going on up here - always mumbles at the blackboard - eh, mm, um... Remember how we all split after our last class to see that American mystery

movie and he didn't go! My head's pounding, he says, I'm going to go sleep it off. So what's your point? My point is that after the film one of us saw him in the subway. So what? Listen, what I mean is, he doesn't give a damn about anything. Westerns, classes, dances, anything. He didn't go to the art museum, and he refused to go on the field trip too. What a drag - that's it, Drag Man. It's a fact. Okay, Svetka, you don't have to give him back, I'll make a present of him. Only Svetka, be sure to wash your neck or he'll start checking it for dust... Never mind, I'll let her have my scarf. A muffler! Even better. Ha ha ha... Well? Better... Ha ha ha... This could go on all night. Oy, I have to pick up Pavlik! I have to run too. Bye girls. Ninka, don't forget tomorrow. What we talked about. Give me a call tonight. What? Call me-e-e!...

The alarm clock, your nastiest enemy, awakens with the punctuality of a country rooster. Seven o'clock. Judging by the sound, the steel rooster's neck has been slightly wrung. Its muffled call makes no impression on you, though. If the alarm clock is half-alive, then you're a corpse. You only sleep like that if exhaustion's been accumulating inside you for weeks. Finally, a few mighty blows on the wall, something's starting to happen: the springs creak, the blanket humps a bit. And here you are sitting up on the bed at last and sending thought signals to your lower extremities, which will have to grope for your slippers, which is about the equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack. Oh well, go to the bathroom barefoot. You put the kettle on the nearest burner and you burn your fingers as usual, and that, thank God, brings you around. It's revolting to look in the mirror, so you keep your washing ritual to a minimum. You're in a hurry anyway. Today you absolutely cannot be late; you're expecting someone from community ed. What do we have here for breakfast? Bread-sticks, mm-hmm, the last bit of sausage, some weak tea. And then five lumps of sugar - to restore your strength after yesterday. Sipping burning tea from your mug, you suddenly stiffen, staring at a single point. The rumble of a distant tram shakes you out of it. And now you see that you're hopelessly late, you scramble, stick your briefcase under your arm (don't forget to tape up that frayed handle) and plow out of your shared apartment, your half-asleep co-inhabitants - five adults, one high-strung little girl who dreams of travel and who when asked what she's going to be answers "Zigmund and Ganzelka," and also a rusty old pussycat misnamed Tom as a baby - curse you roundly without ever waking up. Skidding down from the fourth floor like a top, you spit down the stairwell as usual and attempt - in vain, naturally - to reach the bottom before the spit splashes on the Dutch tile. You'll fly the whole way to school, the length of two old Moscow lanes, whose

astonishing curves are a credit to the arcane fantasy of their seventeenth-century builders, taking one big jump and braking before the next so you don't step on a crack. Only one thing can tear you away from this highly intellectual game. Then you speed up, trying as you go to summon up a portrait of that stranger, so that when you overtake her you can ascertain how right or wrong your sketch is. You run into the school-yard with the bell. You hesitate at the classroom door, already envisioning how you'll push it open, your guilty: "May I? Today I..." And the class will crash-hang amiably, rejoicing that you're late again and someone won his bet, reveling in their own invincibility, and then, with a doomed sigh, you push the door open and say: "May I? Today I..." and the class amiably... And so forth. You walk to your desk, trying not to look at anyone, and at the same time you can't help but notice the tight sweater on Yulechka Luntz, and Svetka's new hairdo, and... But they're already calling you to the board, and the chalk is crumbling in your fingers, and someone is motioning to you from the back rows, but what's he saying? - you can't make it out. All right, what's the deal here, time to unfurl the white flag. You sit there as boring as a blank pad, but your internal clock is running, racing, less and less time remains until the start of the show, your show. Only please, no idle talk... Talkers, attention! Left face! Narrow hips, straight spine, jangling charm bracelet. And what size cup do we have here? Oh well, not much. But those legs - a kangaroo! Houndstooth mini, barely to cover. Shoulder-blades temptingly shadowed under a white turtleneck. Cropped hair that collects in the back in a barely perceptible hollow. Sixteen, seventeen if you push it. Heal fast, you can tell right away. Tries to pass for naive. Voila! She's speeding up for the trolley. Runs like a boy, too, no flailing legs, no flying heels. Gone. Set sail. Home, to Australia. Just give a whistle and I'll be there. Now here's something completely different. Slutty strut, freckle face. Aren't we all decked out! Cotton frock slit to the waist, red polka dots on the bottom, navy top, lace inset tease across your breasts, puff sleeves - how chic. Auburn hair. Center part. Light brown curls in back. And the breasts, the breasts, just like Yulka's. Only this one's shape is nobler. If I could just have a quiet moment with you, my beauty, in some dark entry-way... but what's the best approach? She's an ocean liner, and who am I? A skiff bobbing over the waves right at her waterline. Better move on to that hick over there. Fire. Volcano. Country and western. See-through gauze with loose ties flapping over her breasts, a long wraparound wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am skirt, cork-wedge sandals. Maybe a little low-slung, but the rest is perfect. I speed up, only three or four meters separate us. Now

I'm going to put my left hand on her hip, and cover her pointy breast with my right so that my middle finger slips... Sensing my touch, the hick turns around and I see - holy, holy, holy - an honest-to-God flounder flattened by her humdrum life - two miserable leeches for kids, a shrew of a mother-in-law, a cheating husband who buys her off with his lady friends' secondhand clothes. So much for your volcano. Great bods, I tell you, they're like jubilee rubles - engraved on one side, nice to the touch, but turn 'em over and they're flat as a pancake. Here's the subway. Going down the escalator I ogle the sex kittens coming up. No need to be shy here. They can dish out a kilo of contempt and in a second it's over. On the chilly platform I take up my usual post, by the third column, where I have a terrific view of the entire area. Sacred moments draw nigh. I'm standing behind the column, merging with its gray marble, an invisible being, a cyclops. I'm one omniscient eye now which, like the beam of a searchlight, rifles through the crowd expelled from the train for a soothing figure, a pretty little face, and then it switches to full power - so it's you, is it? Well, let's see what we have here. An utterly incomparable gratification: grab, undress, fondle, squeeze. No one can deprive me of this private pleasure. This is my time. I'm the boss here. If you could see your Drag Man now, master of this underworld kingdom. With a single glance I command - this one - and she's mine. Head- spinning color, a kaleidoscope of naked arms and necks, a carnival of bright beads and stupid earrings, the muffled tapping of clogs, the horsy clip-clop of metal hooves. And the smells! Air electrified by the confused scent of perfume and skin. Intoxicating, ravishing smell. Around me chaos, movement, fragments of words bouncing off reverberating walls, rustling dresses, frills, flounces, tanned necks, creamy pink, an almost edible little knee flashing from under a mini, a pleat, a gather, ruffles, cutouts, sashes dancing on butts to the beat of feet, hands flying up, patting hairdos on the way, artificially lengthened eyes of new-age Cleopatras, ankles, calves, hips showing through thin cloth, a precision bikini line, the pout of a coed late for her date, the breath poured out by a haughty blonde, the sly look of a cute hairdresser aimed suddenly at me from a velvet ambush - it's more than words can tell! And then, having sucked the nectar dry from that blossom, I board the train. All this so far is merely a prelude, a preliminary etude, to fire up the imagination; the train itself is an almost mystic ritual, shamanism. Now I'll set my magnetic capabilities in motion. Don't think I'm making it easy on myself, no allowances made. I've got only two and a half minutes or so, the time it takes for the train to fly from one station to the next. I check out the train like an experienced

horse-thief and make an instantaneous choice. There she is, a little round-shouldered, redheaded, so wrapped up in her mystery she doesn't even notice that the squished tomato in the string bag of the lady pressed up against her is drooling on her two hundred - ruble denim dress. From that moment on the people around me cease to exist. As do the few meters that separate me and the redhead. I press up behind her, I stroke her coarse hair, rake my fingers through it; my other hand glides over her hip, feels the roundness of her stomach, clambers up to the left breast, my God, I can feel her warmth in my palm and a birthmark just down from the nipple, I can hear the beat of her heart, it's so strong it seems to be throwing my hand off, and now I close my eyes, I don't need to look at my chosen one, her image is stamped in gold inside my eyelids, I whisper, my beloved, my saffron mushroom, I stroke her, and kiss her, inhaling the almost sickly sweet aroma of her expensive perfume, and I already know by heart how the depression under her protruding collarbone smells, and I can call each little hole in her lace bra by name, with the tips of my fingers I read, like a blind man, the innermost curves of her pliant body, I comprehend that body like my own property, although what do I have to do with it, there is no me, I've already dissolved in her, I breathe through her pores, I catch the draft through the slit in her dress, and I'm about to lose it - but how can I in front of people? - when I need to scratch one particular place where an escaped elastic (I meant to mend that yesterday!) has cut into my skin. The train is slowing down, we're coming into the station, and so my time is running out, but even with eyes closed I can well see my saffron mushroom looking at me with dilated pupils, crumpling her forgotten mystery against the bag of tomatoes, her chest heaving. Not without effort I pry my lids open and... meet the unblinking gaze of green eyes, and of course, I can't hold back, I never can, and save myself by running through the incredibly necessary opened doors. End of experiment. After that there'll be other trains, other directions, so that I'll quickly forget where the next train is speeding me, and naturally, my choices change - young and older, skinny and ones with some meat on them, as they say, ones who kick in with half a turn and ones cold as subway marble, but it doesn't matter - I'm going to conquer them in the numbered minutes of the train's run. But what's the point if I know I'm going to give it up when, eventually, it's time to open my eyes and slam into the stare of someone who may already have agreed to everything. Take last Wednesday. The train was coming into Kashirskaya station, I was standing - not in my dreams, no! - next to this hippie, we weren't looking at each other, but she was already won over, she wanted it as much as I did, I knew it,

our hands nervously squeezing the metal bar moved closer and closer, slowly, irrepressibly, they weren't more than half a hand apart now, I was like a taut string, well then, well, here, now, put your sweaty palm over that little fist and she's yours, and you're hers, and that's the end to the inhuman torment that's been tearing at me as long as I can remember and that's developed this astonishing gift in me - but there was the station, and I never did manage to relocate my hand half a hand to the left, and when the doors opened, the girl cast a desperately appealing and at the same time contemptuous look at me and then stepped out onto the platform. The train shuddered, floated off, and she was still standing on the platform and looking at me strange-like. Even today - this was getting on toward ten, time to get a move on home - something absolutely wild happened. An elegant lady of about forty, the wife of some very successful wheeler dealer, turned out to be highly receptive. I didn't even have to close my eyes. It only took a minute to get her going. And then, squinting slightly so that from the side it looked as if I were dozing off, then when I could observe her without interference through a web of lashes (my favorite trick), I pressed her to me with one hand and with the other unzipped her tweed skirt. I was a little hasty, and as a result the only - brass - button, which had been hanging on by a thread, popped off, as if it were alive, onto the floor, and hid under someone's sole. I slipped two fingers under silky cloth and then... then... My head was spinning, I thought I was going to faint. In my opinion she was near to fainting as well. I'd never gone that far before... But here she was already moving toward the exit, holding her skirt up with her hand and covering it up with a "Beryozka" package just in case, and suddenly through the clang of the doors her voice floated into my consciousness, three letters, uttered evilly, jerkily: "S. O. B.!" It seemed like there was an extra sound... "oo"... yes, yes, "oo", a very raw, dank sound, as if it had come from under ground, where moisture beads on the walls and the ceiling is covered with a foul mold. She must have screamed out: "You S. O. B.!" But then the doors slammed closed, and I was rocked backward.

You go home through emptied back streets lit by infrequent streetlights. Your temples pounding, the noises of the subway swirling in your ears. Lord, how much can I take? A month, maybe, maybe five. Not years, for sure. After magically dissolving in someone else, in a woman, your own flesh is defiant again, shameful. Your brain is splitting. To hell with everything. Home. Take a bath, free yourself... if only... if only... How filthy can you get. And this one still at her sewing machine. Mom, you again! We go out of our way for him, and

S.O.B. written by Sergei Task.

what does he do in return? Did I ask?! You purposely sew one after another so that you can reproach me later. Purposely! M-m-m. Do we have any aspirin? Doesn't hear. When she needs to she hears everything. You should sleep with that Singer of yours! Oh well, my feet aren't throbbing so much, and my head's let up a little. Now for a bath. Why deny yourself this little weakness after all.

He raised himself heavily from the bed, and grabbing a Western magazine with an ad for summer fashions from the year before last, he went to the bathroom. The latch clicked, a powerful stream pounded from the faucet. If at that dim hour of the full moon a fallen angel flying over the upturned earth were to fly in the open door to the kitchen and, scratching the faded wallpaper with its sharp wing, rustle down the narrow hallway past the bathroom, the angel would shudder to hear through the foaming of the water a repressed, beastly groan.

Written by Sergei Task.

Translated by Marian Schwartz.